The rise of silver-haired influencers: Intergenerational emotional compensation and the emotional needs of Chinese Youth on Douyin

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Abstract

This study investigates how silver-haired influencers on Douyin serve as digital mediators for intergenerational emotional compensation among Chinese youth. The research seeks to understand the mechanisms by which these influencers evoke feelings of nostalgia for elders and address the emotional needs of young users separated from their families due to geographic mobility. The study adopts a qualitative methodology, employing semi-structured interviews with 23 Chinese youth aged 18–24 who have followed silver-haired influencers on Douyin for more than six months. Interview data were analyzed thematically, focusing on emotional responses, psychological motivations, and the perceived role of digital interaction in mediating intergenerational bonds. The results reveal that silver-haired influencers evoke youth nostalgia for elders in three primary ways: nostalgic storytelling, simulated digital intimacy, and algorithmic amplification. The study identifies three key compensatory effects for youth: alleviation of guilt over not accompanying elders, regret for family separation, and reinforcement of self-esteem. These influencers function as symbolic surrogates, offering both emotional comfort and cultural connection in the context of familial estrangement. Silver-haired influencers on Douyin play a significant role in fulfilling the emotional and psychological needs of Chinese youth who are geographically distant from their families. While digital interactions provide meaningful emotional relief and foster a sense of virtual familial belonging, they cannot fully substitute for real-life intergenerational relationships. The findings extend the application of psychological and emotional compensation theory to the context of social media, highlighting the unique contributions of digital platforms in shaping intergenerational connections. This research offers actionable insights for platform designers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to strengthen intergenerational ties in digital society. The dual compensation framework proposed in this study suggests new directions for digital content strategies and aging policy, emphasizing the social value of elderly influencers as emotional mediators in contemporary China.

Keywords: Emotional compensation, Intergenerational interaction, Psychological compensation, Silver-haired Influencers, Social media.

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the internet in China has led to an increasing number of elderly individuals exploring social media and becoming part of the senior user demographic [1-3]. Douyin, with its user-friendly interface and algorithm-driven content recommendations, has become the most popular social media platform in China.

Since 2015, the Chinese government has implemented a series of policies aimed at enhancing digital literacy among the elderly, encouraging their participation in online social interactions, and creating a favorable environment for the rise of silver-haired influencers. Notably, the *14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of the National Aging Cause and the Elderly Services System* issued by the State Council in 2021 emphasizes the importance of improving the digital skills of older adults to help them integrate into the digital society. Additionally, China is actively pursuing the goal of building a society that promotes active aging. *The Rural Revitalization Strategic Plan (2018-2022)* stresses the need to bridge the digital divide between urban and rural areas, ensuring that elderly populations in rural regions are not left behind in the digital transformation. These policies not only enable older adults to engage with digital platforms but also provide fertile ground for the rise of silver-haired influencers on platforms like Douyin. These influencers have become important bridges for intergenerational communication, connecting older and younger generations and serving as cultural and emotional links.

As more elderly users begin to engage with Douyin, recording and sharing their lives, many have gradually become silver-haired influencers [4]. These influencers have become role models for many older adults and emotional pillars for numerous youth in China, evoking feelings of nostalgia for their own grandparents. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in first- and second-tier cities. Due to work or other reasons, youth often lack the time to care for their elderly relatives back home [5]. The rise of silver-haired influencers fills this emotional gap for youth, providing a sense of connection with their distant elders [6]. Their presence stirs nostalgia for older generations among youth in China [7]. Despite the widespread use of social media, many youths still feel emotionally distant from their families due to life pressures and physical separation. Silver-haired influencers, through emotional compensation mechanisms, offer psychological comfort to these youths [6].

To understand the emotional relationship between silver-haired influencers and youth in China, we draw on the theories of psychological compensation and emotional compensation. Psychological compensation theory suggests that when individuals face emotional or psychological distress, they seek alternative ways to alleviate anxiety, such as through social media, as discussed by scholars like [8, 9]. In contrast, emotional compensation theory focuses on how interpersonal interactions help fill emotional voids [10]. In contemporary China, youth often experience emotional deprivation due to physical separation from their elders, and silver-haired influencers on Douyin serve as a form of compensation. Through engaging with their content, youth can experience a surrogate sense of familial warmth and emotional connection, meeting emotional needs and strengthening intergenerational bonds. This virtual interaction fills the emotional gap, highlighting the cultural significance of the relationship between the elderly and youth in modern society. Therefore, the influence of silver-haired influencers can be seen as a form of psychological and emotional compensation made possible through digital platforms.

Most existing literature on silver-haired influencers focuses on their characteristics Miranda, et al. [11] image Farinosi [12] and Zhou and Wu [13] language skills Zhou and Wang [14] promotional strategies [15, 16] and culture [17]. However, research from the perspective of youth, especially regarding whether and how silver-haired influencers impact them, is scarce. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how silver-haired influencers evoke feelings of nostalgia among elders in China and provide emotional compensation through their content.

This study aims to fill the research gap in this field by focusing on the perspective of users' perception or otherness to explore whether silver-haired influencers can evoke emotional longing for elders among Chinese youth and how they provide emotional compensation through their content. The research questions are RQ1) How do silver-haired influencers on Douyin evoke a sense of longing for elders among Chinese youth? RQ2) In what ways do silver-haired influencers offer emotional compensation to Chinese youth?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Silver-Haired Influencers' Youth Impact

The academic community has coined the term silver-haired influencers to refer to what appears to be elderly individuals aged 60 and above who seem to have gained influence on social media platforms [2]. As the concept of influencers continues to evolve [18, 19] what seems especially noteworthy in this analytical context is that silver-haired influencers have emerged as what might be characterized as a unique and influential force in digital spaces, offering diverse perspectives that appear to challenge conventional norms and promote social change. Their presence tends to suggest what appears to be a vehicle for fostering intergenerational communication, seemingly bridging the generational gap, and what the evidence appears to reveal is a reshaping of perceptions of aging among Chinese youth [6].

What the data seems to suggest is that silver-haired influencers engage with youth users through various content formats, such as storytelling, humor, and shared personal experiences [20]. Within this broader analytical framework, many silver-haired influencers on Douyin apparently engage their followers by sharing nostalgic stories of their youth, which ostensibly resonate emotionally with younger users [21]. These narratives seem to create a sense of continuity between generations, establishing what appears to constitute a deeper emotional connection with users. What also seems significant in this context is that humor plays a seemingly pivotal role, as silver-haired influencers typically use wit and self-deprecating humor to break down generational barriers and present what appears to be a more relatable, humanized image of aging [22]. Additionally, given the complexity of these theoretical relationships, silver-haired influencers are predominantly redefining elderly standards. What these findings seem to indicate is that they also provide emotional support to youth by addressing feelings of isolation, loneliness, and disconnection often experienced by young people in modern, urbanized society [23]. What the investigation appears to indicate is that by presenting a lifestyle that emphasizes positivity, resilience, and a balanced approach to life, these influencers tend to offer a model of emotional well-being and coping strategies that appear to resonate with youth.

Their content often appears to serve as a form of emotional compensation, seemingly fulfilling an unmet need for emotional connection that many young people seem to experience due to physical separation from their elders in today's fast-paced society [24]. What seems especially noteworthy in this analytical context is that, despite their ostensibly positive impact, silver-haired influencers face challenges, particularly within the broader analytical framework of commercialization. The commodification of their authentic presence may at times appear to dilute the emotional connections they establish with their followers, potentially weakening what seems to constitute the sincerity of the bond between elderly influencers and youth [25]. What the evidence appears to reveal, moreover, is that while these influencers seem to play a substantial role in shaping social attitudes and promoting intergenerational dialogue, what appears to warrant further interpretive consideration are questions about whether their commercial success may predominantly overshadow what appears to represent the genuine emotional support they offer to youth audiences.

2.2. Intergenerational Relationships and Youth-Elder Interactions in the Context of Technology

The relationship between youth and elders appears to reflect what might be characterized as the evolving nature of social structures and cultural values [26]. Within this broader analytical framework, in traditional societies where elders tend to hold central positions, Chinese youth often seem to demonstrate what appears to be deference and respect towards their elders [27]. However, what seems particularly significant is that in more egalitarian cultures, communication appears to be generally characterized by what tends to suggest a more open exchange of ideas and opinions [28]. What the evidence appears to reveal is that the rise of technology has introduced new dimensions to this relationship, particularly on social media platforms like Douyin, where the interaction between youth and elderly influencers seems to have created a space for emotional connection.

Youth, often referred to as digital natives, may apparently find it challenging to bridge what appears to be the technological gap with their elders [29]. However, what seems to emerge from these findings is that silver-haired influencers on Douyin have largely navigated this divide, fostering what appears to be meaningful engagement with youth users by embracing digital tools. Their content, which typically includes storytelling, humor, and personal experiences, seems to help bridge generational gaps, allowing youth to engage with the elderly in what appears to be new ways. What the analysis tends to support is that through such interactions, these influencers ostensibly offer emotional compensation by addressing feelings of isolation and disconnection experienced by youth, particularly those physically separated from their elders.

In 2015, Strom introduced what appears to be the concept of intergenerational communication competence, which seems to be crucial in understanding how silver-haired influencers apparently engage youth successfully despite technological barriers. What these findings seem to point toward is that effective communication requires adjusting strategies for cross-generational dialogue while considering the nuanced nature of differences in communication styles and expectations [30]. Given the complexity of these theoretical relationships, silver-haired influencers' ability to use digital platforms to create authentic, relatable content appears to suggest a way to overcome stereotypes and foster emotional connections between generations [22]. What appears to follow from this analysis is that the role of Douyin in facilitating these interactions goes beyond technology. It seemingly serves as a medium for emotional compensation, bridging generational divides in what appears to be a rapidly changing society.

2.3. Psychological and Emotional Compensation in Youth
2.3.1. Psychological Compensation in Youth

Rosenberg appears to suggest that psychological compensation theory tends to involve what might be characterized as individuals restoring their internal balance when facing psychological instability [31]. What seems especially noteworthy in this analytical context is how this theory focuses on the negative emotional impact individuals seemingly experience when they face emotional deprivation and appears to indicate that compensatory actions may help mitigate these effects [32]. Essentially, what the evidence appears to reveal is that individuals typically use interactions with others, especially through new channels like social media, to fill what appears to be emotional gaps and restore balance [33]. What this pattern seems to suggest, therefore, is support for the investigation of how Chinese youth might potentially achieve psychological balance by engaging with silver-haired influencers on Douyin.

Additionally, scholars such as Bakhtin and Rosenberg seem to generally indicate that when individuals face various pressures [8]. They apparently adopt new methods to restore balance and achieve emotional satisfaction. Given the complexity of these theoretical relationships, Chinese youth, who are predominantly living away from their families, ostensibly experience a sense of longing for their elders [34]. What appears particularly significant about these findings is that this longing tends to create what seems to constitute a form of pressure, setting the stage for what appears to be the activation of psychological compensation [35]. Watching videos of silver-haired influencers on Douyin appears to provide what might be characterized as psychological comfort for these young people. Within this broader analytical framework, they may presumably view this symbolic companionship as a way to relieve their emotional longing for their elders. What these findings seem to point toward is the practical application of psychological compensation theory.

Psychological compensation theory is also closely tied to the environment in which Chinese youth develop [36]. They frequently face various pressures, including those related to academic and life challenges, as well as the stress of transitioning into the workforce [37]. As a result, they tend to rely on compensation mechanisms to help manage these pressures. Social relationships are particularly crucial in helping them cope. Through social connections, young people gain a sense of purpose and accomplishment [38]. Furthermore, during the transitional period from university to working life, they experience heightened pressures, which increase the need for psychological compensation [39]. To manage the stress caused by changes in identity, they often reinforce their self-awareness [40]. Social relationships and the reinforcement of self-awareness are elements that silver-haired influencers on Douyin help connect with, providing emotional support and alleviating insecurity in their daily lives.

2.3.2. Emotional Compensation in Youth

Emotional compensation theory focuses on how individuals, when they experience emotional needs, turn to others for emotional support to fill gaps in their own emotions [41]. Baumrind identified a balance between emotional needs and individual behavior, noting that this balance influences emotional compensation behaviors. When individuals face emotional deprivation, they tend to actively seek ways to address this emptiness [42]. With the rise of social media, emotional compensation has shifted from offline to online, where individuals establish virtual emotional connections with others to alleviate feelings of loneliness [43]. This compensation helps individuals maintain emotional stability and psychological satisfaction. Emotional compensation theory is helpful in understanding how silver-haired influencers meet the emotional needs of Chinese youth [10].

Emotional compensation theory also explains how Chinese youth, when their emotional needs are unmet, seek fulfillment through interactions with others [44]. When youth are forced to leave familiar environments and loved ones due to work, academic pressures, or identity transitions, they often turn to strangers who can offer a sense of closeness [45]. This interaction provides emotional satisfaction. Silver-haired influencers, by creating virtual closeness, help fulfill the emotional needs of young people [46]. Through sharing their daily lives and engaging emotionally with users on platforms like Douyin, they evoke a sense of longing for elders among Chinese youth [47]. In return, youth experience a sense of fulfillment similar to familial affection. The warmth and emotional expression of silver-haired influencers become a key way to meet the emotional needs of youth, cultivating a sense of belonging [27]. Therefore, emotional compensation theory offers a new perspective for understanding how generational emotional gaps can be bridged and further reveals the mediating and social roles of silver-haired influencers.

2.3.3. The Integration of Emotional and Psychological Compensation

Psychological compensation and emotional compensation, though related, address different dimensions of human responses to unmet needs [48]. Psychological compensation refers to individuals adopting alternative behaviors to cope with psychological discomfort when intrinsic needs, such as self-worth or autonomy, are unfulfilled [49]. In contrast, emotional compensation is specifically concerned with seeking interpersonal closeness to compensate for unmet emotional needs, particularly in relationships, to achieve a sense of emotional fulfillment [50].

In the context of modern Chinese youth, these two forms of compensation manifest differently. When facing life pressures, young people often engage with silver-haired influencers on Douyin as a psychological compensation mechanism, using their content as a form of distraction or emotional regulation to relieve stress [44]. At the same time, silver-haired influencers offer warmth, companionship, and care, which fulfill youth's longing for intergenerational emotional connections [21]. This deeper emotional engagement reflects emotional compensation, as youth interact with these influencers to substitute for the absence of real-life elder figures in their lives [51].

Understanding these two theories together provides a more nuanced perspective on how Chinese youth navigate stress and emotional needs in the social media age. While psychological compensation explains their behavioral engagement with digital content to manage distress, emotional compensation accounts for the relational attachment they develop with silver-

haired influencers. This dual-framework approach helps clarify the evolving role of digital influencers in fulfilling both psychological and emotional voids in contemporary Chinese society.

3. Methodology

The semi-structured interviews, a widely used method [52-54]. It could be used to explore youth emotional responses and motivations toward silver-haired influencers on Douyin. The decision to use semi-structured interviews is based on the need to gain a deeper understanding of the emotional responses, psychological motivations, and attitudes of youth users toward silver-haired influencers on Douyin. Semi-structured interviews allow for a more direct exploration of youth perceptions through detailed, personal narratives. This method offers an opportunity to investigate the underlying emotional connections and generational dynamics in these interactions, which are crucial for understanding how these influencers impact the youth audience.

3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Purposive sampling selected 23 Chinese youths, aged 18-24, living away from home in first- and second-tier cities for studies or work. This sample size aligns with similar research, where 20-30 participants are considered ideal for semi-structured interviews [55]. All participants followed silver-haired influencers on Douyin for over six months, viewing their content frequently. Semi-structured interviews explored emotional responses, psychological motivations, and connections, each lasting at least 60 minutes. The flexible, open-ended interview format encouraged participants to share their thoughts and feelings freely (As shown in Table 1).

Table 1.
Youth Participant Selection Form Information.

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Current City	Living Situation	SHI Follow Duration	Interview Duration (mins)
P1	18	M	Hefei	Student Dorm	>6 months	60
P2	18	M	Shenzhen	Shared Apartment	>6 months	65
P3	22	M	Beijing	Student Dorm	>6 months	70
P4	22	M	Nanjing	Rental Apartment	>6 months	75
P5	22	F	Xi'an	Shared Apartment	>6 months	80
P6	21	F	Fuzhou	Student Dorm	>6 months	60
P7	21	M	Chengdu	Shared Apartment	>6 months	65
P8	24	F	Xiamen	Rental Apartment	>6 months	70
P9	23	F	Chongqing	Student Dorm	>6 months	75
P10	22	F	Suzhou	Shared Apartment	>6 months	80
P11	24	F	Jinan	Rental Apartment	>6 months	60
P12	21	F	Shanghai	Student Dorm	>6 months	65
P13	20	M	Tianjin	Shared Apartment	>6 months	70
P14	19	F	Wuhan	Student Dorm	>6 months	75
P15	24	F	Kunming	Rental Apartment	>6 months	80
P16	18	F	Zhengzhou	Student Dorm	>6 months	60
P17	20	F	Ningbo	Shared Apartment	>6 months	65
P18	21	M	Changsha	Student Dorm	>6 months	70
P19	23	F	Hangzhou	Shared Apartment	>6 months	75
P20	20	M	Qingdao	Rental Apartment	>6 months	80
P21	19	M	Guangzhou	Student Dorm	>6 months	60
P22	22	F	Dongguan	Shared Apartment	>6 months	65
P23	23	M	Shenyang	Rental Apartment	>6 months	70

We also adhered to the principle of data saturation, which occurs when no new emotional themes emerge from additional interviews, indicating that further data collection is unnecessary [56-59]. Once saturation was reached, we began the analysis process, where emotional themes were refined and validated. To ensure the consistency and stability of these themes, we tested them multiple times.

3.2. Interview Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using a semi-structured approach, focusing on both words and full sentences [60-62]. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and read line by line to identify emotional expressions such as nostalgia, missing, and longing, as well as references to elder roles and spiritual support [56, 63, 64]. In the coding process, relevant emotional content was highlighted, with sentences expressing memories of family or comfort from influencers being categorized. The analysis revealed that when real-life relationships with elders were limited, participants turned to silver-haired influencers for emotional compensation. These influencers provided a sense of connection, comfort, and spiritual support, helping youth address emotional gaps created by distance or estrangement from their own family members (As shown in Table 2).

Table 2.
Summary Table of Interview Data Themes.

Main-Theme	Sub-Theme	Quotes
Nostalgic Storytelling	Stories of past traditions evoke warm memories of elders.	P2 (M,18): 'It reminded me of the smell of home from my childhood. It really touched me.'
Digital Intimacy	Affectionate interactions simulate familial bonds.	P9 (F,23): 'She'd ask, Have you eaten? Don't stay up too late... it felt like my grandmother.'
Regret for Not Reuniting with Family	Silver-haired influencers replace lost or absent grandparents.	P3 (M,22): 'I envy kids with grandparents.' / P6 (F,21): 'They make me feel warmth.'
Guilt for Not Accompanying Elders	Feelings of guilt alleviated through parasocial connection.	P1 (M,18): 'I miss my grandmother... this gives me comfort.' / P15 (F,24): 'It's virtual but comforting.'
Algorithmic Amplification	Platform algorithms reinforce emotional dependence.	P11 (F,24): 'The platform only showed me that style. It knew who I missed.'
Compensation for Low Self-Esteem	Interactions offer validation and relief from inferiority.	P5 (F,22): 'Sharing their videos makes me feel a bit better.' / P23 (M,23): 'It eases my guilt.' / P17 (F,20): 'Their wisdom inspires me.'

4. Findings and Discussion

This study explores how silver-haired influencers on Douyin evoke Chinese youths' longing for elders (RQ1) and offer emotional compensation (RQ2). By synthesizing interview data, four interconnected emotional themes emerged. These findings collectively address RQ1 by demonstrating how influencers trigger nostalgia through relatable content, while RQ2 is answered through the identification of compensatory mechanisms rooted in psychological theories. Crucially, the analysis moves beyond descriptive accounts to critically evaluate whether these digital interactions meaningfully replace familial bonds or merely offer transient relief, while also situating findings within cross-cultural and cross-platform contexts.

4.1. Silver-haired Influencers in Evoking Chinese Youth's Emotional Connection with Elders

Silver-haired influencers evoke a deep sense of longing for elders among youth by sharing personal stories that are steeped in nostalgia. These influencers often recount family traditions and past memories, offering a window into a simpler, cherished past. This connection taps into the nostalgia that many youths feel for family bonds, serving as a form of psychological and emotional compensation, where the past is emotionally reimagined to fulfill present-day needs for connection and comfort [65].

4.1.1. Nostalgic Storytelling as a Trigger for Intergenerational Emotions

Many silver-haired influencers on Douyin evoke memories of elders among youth by sharing snippets of their daily lives and recounting stories about family traditions and bygone times [66]. These narratives often carry a warm, nostalgic tone. Whether it involves putting up Spring Festival couplets, preparing New Year's Eve dinners, or reminiscing about setting off firecrackers in village courtyards, these familiar details of everyday life build an emotional bridge that connects generations across time. As participant 2 reflected.

> I have never been particularly close to my grandparents, but when I saw this elderly lady talking about how she used to steam New Year cakes, it suddenly reminded me of the smell of home from my childhood. It really touched me. (Participant 2, male, 18 years old).

Within the framework of emotional compensation theory, such moments of resonance can be seen as a form of emotional projection [52, 67]. Youth attempt to revisit or replace blurred or broken familial ties through the mediated intimacy of online videos. However, one must notice whether this emotional connection involves an idealization of elders, either by the influencers themselves or by their youth followers [68]. While these portrayals tend to highlight the warmth

and wisdom of older generations, they often gloss over the complexities, tensions, and sometimes painful dynamics of real-life intergenerational relationships. In this sense, nostalgic storytelling, though deeply moving, can act as a cultural filter—one that paints an overly romanticized picture of the past and subtly suggests that elders, as portrayed through digital lenses, are the sole emotional anchors worth longing for.

4.1.2. Digital Intimacy: Simulating Familial Bonds through Everyday Interaction

In addition to the warmth of narrative content, the way silver-haired influencers interact with their followers deepens the sense of emotional substitution between generations. Many silver-haired influencers use affectionate terms like darling, daughter, or grandchild when replying to comments, adopting a gentle, caring tone. This approach acts as a psychological simulation of familial bonds that may be distant or absent in real life [69, 70].

Participant 9 (female, 23 years old) shared, "There was a time when I was really stressed, and I would often watch videos of an elderly lady. She'd ask, 'Have you eaten? Don't stay up too late,' and it really felt like my grandmother when I was younger." This form of digital intimacy blurs the line between real and virtual connections, making Douyin a kind of emotional sanctuary. According to Rosenberg's theory of psychological compensation in 1965, when intergenerational support systems in real life fail to meet emotional needs, individuals tend to seek compensatory interactions in virtual spaces. Douyin, with its sense of immediate companionship, offers such a space. However, as Teo and Cui [21] and Brooks, et al. [22] also caution, we must be wary of the comforting function of these virtual familial bonds [21, 22]. While emotionally fulfilling in the short term, they cannot replace the depth and stability of real-world family relationships over time.

4.1.3. Regret For Not Reuniting with Families

Silver-haired influencers help address the regret of not reuniting with family, a core value in traditional Chinese culture. Due to work and life pressures, many youths are unable to experience family gatherings. Participant 3 (male, 22 years old) shared, "I envy children with grandparents. Mine passed away young, so I watch silver-haired influencers to make up for my desires." Silver-haired influencers become emotional outlets for youths, offering an "ideal grandparent" figure. Participant 6 expressed that their caring words compensate for the lack of affection from her grandparents.

> Every time I see silver-haired influencers, I think of my grandfather. He was very kind to me. Unfortunately, I didn't appreciate the time I spent with him. So, every time I see silver-haired influencers, it makes me feel as if my grandparents are still alive. Especially the caring words from silver-haired influencers make me feel as if my grandparents are talking to me, providing a sense of warmth. (Participant 6, female, 21 years old).

Their conversations align with emotional and psychological compensation theory, which suggests that individuals turn to compensatory sources to fill emotional gaps caused by family loss or intergenerational separation. Participant 3's envy of those with grandparents and their interaction with silver-haired influencers demonstrates how digital figures address unmet emotional needs [47]. Similarly, Participant 6's reflection on her grandfather and the emotional comfort from influencers highlights emotional compensation, where youth seek digital figures to alleviate feelings of loss, meeting their emotional needs [27]. Through silver-haired influencers sharing their daily lives, family interactions, and holiday gatherings, youth can experience the warmth of family online, compensating for real-life regrets. By telling stories of family reunions and traditional holiday activities, these influencers help youth reconnect with their sense of belonging to family. They convey the warmth of family through words and images, and by discussing traditional customs and family culture, they help the younger generation feel the strength of family bonds, addressing the emotional gap related to family relationships.

4.2. Types of Emotional Compensation Experienced by Chinese Youth

Silver-haired influencers on Douyin serve as digital surrogates for intergenerational emotional connections, helping youth address psychological needs. These emotional compensations can be categorized into four themes, each addressing specific emotional needs. By sharing relatable content, these influencers bridge emotional gaps, fostering a sense of connection to family, cultural traditions, and belonging, while providing both immediate relief and long-term emotional support for Chinese youth.

4.2.1. Feelings of Guilt for Not Accompanying Elders

The rise of silver-haired influencers helps alleviate the guilt many youths feel for not being able to care for their elderly relatives due to work or study commitments. This separation from family triggers emotional imbalance, conflicting with traditional filial piety. As Participant 1 explains, the pressures of life make it hard to visit family, but silver-haired influencers provide emotional comfort, offering a sense of connection and alleviating feelings of guilt.

> I really miss my grandmother, but I had to leave for school. She is over 80 now, and I do not know how much longer I will be able to spend time with her. So every time I see these silver-haired influencers' posts, I cannot help but watch them longer, as if I am spending time with my grandmother. Especially sometimes when I see their content, I feel very sad. I regret not being there for my grandparents and not fulfilling my filial duties. (Participant 1, male, 18 years old)

Participant 1's statement about missing his grandmother and seeking comfort through silver-haired influencers reflects how young people, when experiencing emotional deprivation and longing for family connections, turn to digital personalities to fill that emotional void. This behavior shows how individuals (especially those separated from their

families) interact with social media personalities as a form of psychological compensation, restoring inner balance by experiencing emotional intimacy indirectly. As Rosenberg, Walther, and Whitty have pointed out, this compensatory behavior helps reduce guilt and regret while meeting emotional needs [32]. Participant 1 finds an emotional connection through silver-haired influencers who share family interactions and traditional wisdom, easing the emotional gap in real life. These influencers' relatable images help youth reconnect with the comfort of family emotions. Participant 15 resonates with this, feeling a sense of loss from being distant from her elders. Viewing silver-haired influencers allows her to interact virtually, helping to alleviate that emotional void and compensate for the loss of direct connection with her elders.

> The rise of silver-haired influencers made me realize that although I can't always be with my grandparents, at least I can feel a similar sense of companionship through these videos, even though they're virtual and only temporary. But it still provides me with comfort. (Participant 15, female, 24 years old)

Participant 15's statement resonates with the concept of "symbolic companionship" in psychological compensation theory. The participant mentions feeling a sense of companionship through virtual connections with silver-haired influencers, which reflects the theory's view that individuals turn to other sources of comfort, especially when they are far from their families. This aligns with Rosenberg's framework, which posits that compensatory behaviors (such as interacting with influencers) help alleviate emotional deprivation and provide psychological balance. Moreover, interaction with virtual personalities addresses the emotional void caused by separation from elders, as explored in recent research [51].

4.2.2. Platform Algorithms and the Amplification of Emotional Longing

In the process of emotional resonance, Douyin is not a passive medium. Rather, it actively participates and amplifies users' intergenerational emotional experiences. The platform's algorithm tailors video recommendations based on users' browsing habits, such as frequency of likes and comment content, accurately pushing videos that align with their emotional state. For example, once a user reacts to a silver-haired influencer's traditional craft or nurturing, repetitive care, the system will continue to recommend similar content, creating an emotional feedback loop.

Participant 11 (female, 24 years old) mentioned, "After watching a few videos of silver-haired influencers, for the next few days, the platform only showed me that style. It felt like the platform knew better than I did who I missed." This algorithm-driven emotional connection not only strengthens the emotional dependency between users and the platform, but it also turns the personal emotion of longing for elders into a sentiment that the platform can control, predict, and even market. Whether this emotional resonance is being commodified by the algorithm. When the algorithm identifies emotional needs, it continually amplifies those needs, creating a cycle. Burgess raises concerns, arguing that while such algorithm-driven experiences of familial warmth offer surface-level comfort, they cannot replace the authentic, multifaceted emotional exchanges between people [39]. Nevertheless, even though it cannot replace real emotional interactions, the presence of silver-haired influencers alleviates the emotional longing for elders, providing youth with a sense of psychological reassurance.

4.2.3. Compensation for Low Self-Esteem

Silver-haired influencers help youth alleviate feelings of inferiority caused by perceived inadequacies. In China's competitive society, many youth face immense pressure, leading to self-doubt. Participant 5 (female, 22 years old) shared: "Sometimes I feel like I am not useful, but at least every time I watch their videos, I like or share them with my friends, and that makes me feel a little better." Similarly, Participant 23 (male, 23 years old) mentioned that interacting with silver-haired influencers helps ease his frustration over not being able to financially support his grandparents.

> Because I can't make a lot of money and can't ensure my grandparents live a comfortable life, I feel really useless. So every time I see those poorer silver-haired influencers, I think of my grandparents. That's why I like or comment on their videos; I feel like I'm helping them gain more exposure and monetize. Of course, it's just a way to make myself feel a little better. (Participant 5, female, 22 years old)

The likes and comments from Participant 5 and Participant 23 show support for silver-haired influencers while providing emotional comfort. They reflect on their feelings of inferiority due to financial struggles, using interactions with influencers to ease guilt and discomfort, aligning with Rosenberg's psychological compensation. In this process, silver-haired influencers not only help ease emotions but also provide subtle self-affirmation through interaction. Participant 7 (male, 21 years old) said, "Seeing silver-haired influencers live-streaming at such an old age really inspires me." By sharing their life experiences, professional wisdom, personal growth stories, and positive attitudes, silver-haired influencers offer crucial psychological support to youth in China. Their success stories, experiences of overcoming challenges, and optimistic outlook inspire the younger generation and help them face personal growth challenges, as Participant 17 (female, 20 years old) deeply understands.

> Their work and life experiences have given me a lot of courage to overcome difficulties and challenges. It made me realize that everyone is unique and has the right to pursue a better life. Silver-haired influencers are not just content creators on social media; their experiences and wisdom can serve as real-life role models for young people. When feeling inferior, we can gain courage from watching their content, which helps us face life's challenges more positively. (Participant 17, female, 20 years old)

The emotional compensation theory is reflected in responses to silver-haired influencers, who provide emotional release and support. Individuals facing emotional needs seek compensation through social media interactions [10]. Interaction with silver-haired influencers bridges emotional gaps, offering psychological comfort. Participants 7 and Participant 17 reflected that these influencers, beyond being content creators, serve as role models. Youth gain courage and support from their experiences and wisdom when facing difficulties.

5. Conclusion

This study explores how silver-haired influencers on Douyin evoke youth's nostalgia for their elders (RQ1) and provide emotional compensation (RQ2). By analyzing interview data, the study reveals three interconnected emotional themes, addressing both research questions. However, while digital platforms offer virtual familial comfort, it remains to be seen whether this emotional connection can truly replace real-life familial bonds. The platform's algorithms amplify the feedback loop of emotional needs through precise content recommendations, which temporarily alleviate emotional gaps but do not permanently substitute real family relationships. Silver-haired influencers not only provide emotional relief but also offer a perspective for young people to reassess traditional culture and family values. This study extends emotional and psychological compensation theory, proposing the unique role of digital platforms in intergenerational emotional connections. It highlights the potential of virtual platforms to foster emotional exchange between elders and youth, while also pointing out their limitations.

6. Contribution

Theoretically, this study proposes a dual compensation framework to explain intergenerational emotional connections on digital platforms. It draws upon two established psychological theories, psychological compensation theory and emotional compensation theory, which have traditionally been treated as distinct: the former focuses on inner value and psychological balance, while the latter centers on emotional relationships and affective deficiencies. However, existing literature has rarely applied both theories concurrently in the context of social media and intergenerational emotional dynamics, nor have they been integrated into a unified analytical framework. Based on the observed behaviors of participants on Douyin, this study reveals that youth users experience simultaneous and intertwined emotional needs, such as longing for grandparents and identity-related pressures, like diminished self-worth or societal stress. Silver-haired influencers uniquely fulfill both dimensions, thus transcending the limitations of single-perspective theoretical models. This integrative framework expands the applicability of compensation theory beyond traditional settings like family therapy or counseling, repositioning it within the fields of social media engagement and intergenerational digital communication. It not only examines compensatory behaviors but also unpacks the interplay among platform algorithms, user psychology, and media content in forming a stable emotional substitution mechanism (as illustrated in Figure 1).
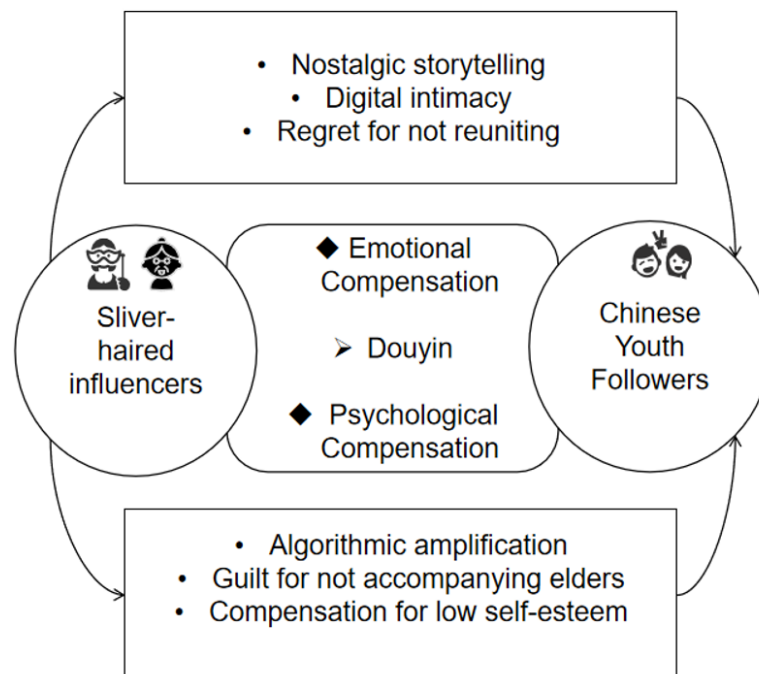

Figure 1.
Dual compensation framework.

Practically, this study uncovers the social potential of silver-haired influencers as novel emotional mediators in contemporary digital culture. Beyond their roles as cultural communicators, silver-haired influencers function as intergenerational emotional restorers, fostering affective ties through content that embodies "digital grandparenthood." Their emotional expressions and interactive styles provide psychological comfort and a sense of belonging to youth living in China's first- and second-tier cities, who are often geographically separated from their families. This insight offers a

practical intervention framework for stakeholders in digital platform design, aging policy, and intergenerational communication programs.

This study makes a significant contribution by shifting the focus from external representation to internal user perception. Departing from prior research that emphasized the public image construction or commercial strategies of silver-haired influencers, this study adopts the perspective of youth audiences and integrates in-depth interviews with emotional theme coding. It systematically examines how young users construct intergenerational projections and psychological identification through short video content. This leads to the original proposal of the "Silver-haired Influencer, Youth User, Digital Emotional Compensation Chain," offering a new theoretical lens for understanding the emotional architecture of youth in social media environments.

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